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ABSTRACT

Noting that the focus of early intervention has expanded to include family-oriented programs and services, this report proposes a framework for evaluating outcomes for families. The framework is offered as a vehicle for further discussion and is based on current values, theories, and models of family functioning, and relationships between families and professionals across the life span; the framework reflects outcomes that early intervention could be expected to affect. Two broad types of family outcomes are proposed: (1) family perceptions of the early intervention experience; and (2) impact of early intervention on various domains of family life. Evaluation questions related to family perceptions include whether the family sees early intervention as appropriate in making a difference in their child's life and whether the family has a positive view of professionals and the special service system. Evaluation questions related to impact on domains of family life include whether early intervention enhanced the family's perceived ability to work with professionals and advocate for services, whether early intervention assisted the family in building a strong support system, and whether early intervention enhanced the family's perceived quality of life. The report concludes with a brief discussion of implications for policy and practice. (KB)

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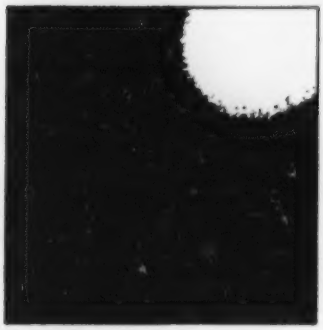

NCEDL Spotlights

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Family Outcomes

Following are excerpts from "Family Outcomes in Early Intervention: A Framework for Program Evaluation and Efficacy Research" in Exceptional Children, (1998), Vol. 64, No. 3, pp. 313-328. The authors suggest that because so many early intervention programs now are family oriented, it may be time to consider adding more specific family outcomes to evaluations of early intervention programs

Evaluating Family-Centered Early Intervention Programs

Most evaluations of the effectiveness of early intervention have focused on outcomes for child-ren. While appropriate, this focus has expanded in recent years to include family-oriented programs and services, suggesting that early intervention also has a responsibility to support families of children with disabilities. Toward that end, we propose two broad types of family outcomes and eight questions we believe to be consistent with current values, theories, and models of family functioning and relationships between families and professionals across the life span, and reflect outcomes that early intervention could be expected to impact. A caveat: This framework has not been validated and is offered as a vehicle for discussion.

Family perceptions of the early intervention experience

1. **Does the family see early intervention as appropriate in making a difference in their child's life?** The field needs better reliability and validity studies of satisfaction measures, strategies to compare parent expectations as a baseline against which outcomes can be judged, and repeated assessment of satisfaction, especially as programs and services change.

2. **Does the family see early intervention as appropriate in making a difference in their family's life?** We assume that early intervention could have a moderating effect on family accommodations—that services both shape families' perspectives and provide resources (e.g., information, equipment, skills). In this way, families may be able to construct routines and adapt activities to correspond more closely with their own cultural and familial expectations.

3. **Does the family have a positive view of professionals and the special service system?** Ideally, at the end of the early intervention experience, families should have had encounters that support the belief that the service system is accessible and helpful, and that service providers will be supportive, responsive, and respectful.

Impact of early intervention on various domains of family life

1. **Did early intervention enable the family to help their child grow, learn, and develop?** For many families, a goal of paramount importance is creating a successful daily routine in which they feel competent as caregivers and their children are competent as learners. One assessment approach could be identifying appropriate caregiver behavior; while another approach might be the parent's perceived competence as caregivers.

2. **Did early intervention enhance the family's perceived ability to work with professionals and advocate for services?** Studies suggest that empowerment consists of at least three related constructs: sense of control over family events, services, and policy. Thus, when empowerment is assessed, care must be taken to ensure that the multiple factors constituting this construct are included.

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3. **Did early intervention assist the family in building a strong support system?** Although the effects of support are certainly critical, we contend that because of its potential power, and because of the possibility that usual sources of support may be reduced or altered when a family has a child with a disability, changes in support constitute a legitimate outcome variable.

4. **Did early intervention help enhance an optimistic view of the future?** This is based on the assumption that experience shapes one's views of the possibilities in life, and that a hopeful outlook is desirable since it can lead to feelings of self-assurance and action toward the accomplishments of outcomes.

5. **Did early intervention enhance the family's perceived quality of life?** As an objective outcome, qualityof life can be defined in terms of available resources and opportunities such as access to health care, employment, and social integration. Subjective dimensions are associated perceptions of life quality in terms of physical, economic, and psychological well-being.

Implications for policy and practice

A major policy issue yet to be determined is the relative importance of child versus family outcomes. Once can envision a scenario in which the child makes little progress but much has changed in the family with respect to the questions suggested here. Would this be considered a successful early intervention effort, or is child change a necessary part of the efficacy equation? In many ways, these two domains are inextricably linked to each other and perhaps the issue is best framed in the context of how family and child needs can be integrated into a comprehensive system of early intervention services.

Ultimately the field must decide whether the results of early intervention efforts, in terms of documented outcomes for clients, constitute a necessary or sufficient basis for determining if our efforts have been justified. Whether we agree with this or not, an expectation of overall efficacy is and likely will continue to be held by consumers and policymakers.

Thus it becomes incumbent upon us to reflect on why we engage in what we do and what are both desirable and realistic expectations for outcomes for all clients of early intervention, which include both children and families.

To Learn More

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The authors of the article on which this *Spotlight* is based are Donald B. Bailey Jr., R.A. McWilliam, Lynette S. Aytch, and Rune J. Simeonsson, all at UNC-CH.; and Kathy Hebbeler, Donna Spiker, and Mary Wagner, all of SRI International, Menlo Park, CA. NCEDL is administratively housed at UNC-CH. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expessed in these reports do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education. Permission is granted to reprint this; we ask that you attribute the authors of the paper on which this *Spotlight* is based and the National Center for Early Development & Learning. This and other *Spotlights* may be downloaded at our web site: **www.ncedl.org**

For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email loyd_little@unc.edu
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